

COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH

THE HEALTHY CHANGES INITIATIVE

The Massachusetts Department of Mental Health (DMH) recognizes the essential role of physical wellness in recovery from psychiatric illness. Recent data from Massachusetts and other states show that those with psychiatric disabilities die from treatable medical illnesses at rates that are significantly higher than those without psychiatric illness, dying up to 25 years earlier than the general population from cardiovascular disease, respiratory illness, and lung cancer.¹ This data clearly demonstrates that those with psychiatric disabilities are a priority health disparities population. In light of this significant health disparity with substantially increased risk of early death and significant disabling illness among individuals with psychiatric disabilities, DMH has established *The Healthy Changes Initiative*.

The Healthy Changes Initiative is designed to address the modifiable risk factors which result in chronic illness and early death in individuals with psychiatric disabilities. Inactivity and resultant obesity, poor nutrition, some psychiatric medications, and cigarette smoking all contribute to diabetes, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure, potentially resulting in increased morbidity and premature death among individuals with serious mental illness. For the last 30 years, it has been well established that cigarette smoking is the single most significant modifiable risk factor for the illnesses which contribute to early death in the United States. Data shows that those with psychiatric illness and employees who care for them smoke at increased rates over the national² and Massachusetts³ general population. Many people enter the mental health system already addicted to nicotine, and a significant number of people began smoking during their first psychiatric hospitalization.

To accomplish its goals of addressing modifiable risk factors for premature death and disability, *The Healthy Changes Initiative* values input from patients, staff, human rights advocates, patient advocates, and union representatives to create a culture of wellness in our facilities and campuses. This initiative emphasizes peer leadership, staff modeling, and motivational interventions to promote healthy lifestyle changes by:

- increasing opportunities for physical activity for patients and staff,
- improving nutritional offerings and providing broad-based nutritional education,
- preventing the development of nicotine addiction in facilities by changing a culture that promotes cigarette smoking, and treating nicotine addiction.

¹ National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD) 13th Technical Report, Morbidity and Mortality in People with Serious Mental Illness, October, 2006.

² National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD) 12th Technical Report, Technical Report on Smoking in State Operated Psychiatric Facilities, July, 2006;

³ Unpublished data, DMH Metro Suburban Area, 1999-2000, 2004.

The Healthy Changes Initiative emphasizes improved health care quality through screening, assessing, and providing evidence-based treatment for nicotine addiction, obesity, and inactivity throughout the system of care.

The mission of the *Healthy Changes Initiative* is to provide a quality improvement framework to identify individuals at risk for illness and premature death, and measure the success of interventions. Comprehensive staff training, supervision, system-wide education, staff modeling, and peer mentoring will foster a culture of wellbeing and recovery, and eliminate the significant health disparity among individuals with psychiatric disabilities.

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